

INDIAN PREHISTORY IN ARUBA, AS MODERN ARUBANS SEE IT

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Aruba's prehistory is laden with secrets. Rock paintings, with unknown meaning; pottery and shell mounds showing some portion of a subsistence level; burials, with and without urns; stone and shell tools, button like polished shell objects, all indicate a form or forms of life preceeding European contact which need analizing and synthesizing for our understanding today.

I looked to the Aruban people to put some of the pieces together. I was not necessarily looking for correct information but more important, for what the people who live here today concieve as their heritage. It was my object to see the continuity they gave their past from fragmentary indications of an ancestral civilization.

The first subgroup I came into contact with upon my arrival in Aruba were the English. With the opening of the Lago refinery on Aruba in 1928, the black people came from the British West Indies to work in the refinery. They live in the towns and are therefore more accessible than other groups I later interviewed.

I found the black people of Aruba to have the least amount of information on the prehistory of Aruba. Their contact with the history of the Indian is limited by the fact that they are such recent inhabitants of Aruba.

There was no tradition of folklore or Indian history of Aruba passed down to them. Also, since Aruba is a Dutch possession, the history of Holland and not Aruba is taught in school. The concrete knowledge of the prehistory being so scant would make the teaching of the subject nearly impossible in any case.

Informant A (X) brought forward his theory on why the Black and all other Arubans have so little knowledge of their past. He stated that the Roman Catholic Church discouraged the Arubans identifying with their "pagan" past. The Church threatened government burial without religious rites to Arubans who might die without confessing their sins, one of which was speaking or trying to gather information about the Indians.

I tend not to believe this theory since I found the priests to be the most enthusiastic collectors and disseminators of pre-historic knowledge. They were of invaluable assistance to many students at the Aruba Research Center.

The information I recieved from the black segment of the population was in large part derived from the Esso map which points out the most famous attractions of the island including historic and prehistoric sights to be seen by tourists.

Informant A spoke of the caves at Huliba which has stalagmites that can be and possibly were used as crystal gongs, and Ayo which has rock paintings. Informants D and E know of stone arrowheads found at Casibari and again the rock paintings at Ayo.

X See appendix for background of Informants and circumstances of interviews.

B was more eager to give information so he said the Incas from Venezuela and Colombia came to Aruba in canoes because of overpopulation. They lived in caves and ate all kinds of fish. He went on to say that the Indians made no fishing hooks and therefore did not eat fish. As he talked it seemed to me that he was making it up as he went along. I was warned that Arubans will say what they think they are expected to say. They will fabricate to please their listeners. I found this true only in the case of Informant B.

I felt that going to the more educated, even intellectual segment of the population might give me more concrete information. I found this not to be the case. Informant H said there were definitely no urn-burials in Aruba, while informant I said there were only burial urns. Archeologists' studies found both. Informant K said that the Carib and Arowak fought until the Arowak drove the Carib out. Informant I said there were only Carib here and they were very peaceloving people. Though both informants have distinctly differing views on the type of Indians living in Aruba (which is discouraging enough) from what I have learned both are wrong. The Arowak came to Aruba first, they were peaceloving people. The Carib, from which the word cannibal is derived, were the most savage people in the Caribbean. They slaughtered and drove out the Arowak.

Informant G believed soil could be used indefinitely if churned with a stick even if the same crop was planted in the soil continuously.

Informant H said the Indian ate no fish, yet a large number of fish vertebra were found with conch and pottery in Tanki Flip.

I concluded that the status in terms of education does not influence the correctness of information on a subject not learned in school. When there is so little written information (not necessarily reliable) about the prehistory of Aruba one can presume an educated person will know as much but not necessarily more than uneducated people. One man, a black schoolteacher, had some interesting comments about the Tanki Flip area. I will get back to him later.

The one foreigner I spoke to, a man from Panama (informant F) seemed to have the most gross misinformation. He said that the Caribs who lived here were short and blond. The reason they left Aruba when the European came was not because of enslavement and death but because the Europeans also had negro slaves. The Indian slaves did not get along with the negro slaves at all, so the indians left. It seems to me that any knowledge to be had about Aruban Indians is personal domain of long established residents of Aruba. The last group of people I interviewed were the older, more isolated people living in the cunucu. These people often spoke Papiamentu only. At first they had little to say, but with some prodding had much more to say.

Two difficulties I was informed during my interviews were that: 1: Informant K told me that the tradition of telling folklore had died about 100 years ago. Folksongs have also died out, therefore much of the information has been completely lost, and 2:

Informant L said that there is a superstition that it is bad luck to tell stories or talk about the Indians during the day, in the house, the result being one will have no more visitors coming to the house. The superstition has generalized so, that one never likes to tell stories. In my interviews I had only two informants' rejections for that reason that I know about. I am sure that some people would rather say they had no information, rather than say they were afraid of a superstition.

The information that follows is that which I collected from all the Arubans I interviewed, young and old. I will identify the sources of the information by informants' letters.

Corresponding to the informants' name, background, and circumstances of interviews all found in the appendix.

Origin and contact with origin.

Two of the informants (J and K) agreed that the Arawak and Caribs lived here, though K felt that the guajiras who came from Colombia came here but did not settle. He also felt that the Arawak drove out the Caribs in warfare. Informant G thought the claim that the Arawak and Caribs were here is unsupported though he is aware they might have been.

He, H, and "I", said there was only one group of Indians from Venezuela, H giving the reason that Venezuela and Aruba are physically close, and they have the same pottery and painting style. "I" said they were Carib and both "I" and H said they were peace loving. They came over on raft (G), and canoes (I).

"I said the Indians also came over in boats 20-25 feet long, carrying one or two animals at a time. These animals included cows, horses, donkeys, and goats. The donkeys grew in number and some were brought back to Venezuela. Other imports from Venezuela were tools for digging wells, baskets and straw hats. G also said that baskets were brought over as well as seed. "I" also talked about the importation of banana leaves for the construction of houses which I will discuss later.

Homes.

M told me that the Indians lived in caves all over the island. H concurred but said that upon the arrival of Europeans the Indians moved to California Point and started building homes. N said they chose rock ledges near the sea, while "I" said they lived on rock ledges on the leeward side of the island. G said the rock ledges were used only as lookout posts for European invaders and the Indians lived in mud shacks at Fontein and Spanish Lagoon, because skeleton and spears were found there.

In discussing the construction of houses, "I" described them as being made of clay and grass, with kwihi wood foundation. The roof was made of banana leaves from Venezuela. J's description differed slightly in that it was buttered (manteca) clay with straw. The foundation was barked wood and the roof which had to be replaced about every 10 years was made of the same manteca clay.

H described the settlement as an area chosen because a large stone was present.

Settlement would be built with this stone at its center and it would be a meeting place for social and religious functions. Sometimes the houses were built between rocks.

Food

When the discussion turned to food the Indians ate, G, H, I, J, M and N all responded by saying the Indians ate conch and shellfish.

"I" and J agreed that they also ate fish caught in nets and the proof of it as M told me was that fish bones were found in Calabas. M and G said they ate fruits, G and "I" being more specific in listing shoshoro (a twig bearing fruit berries), sea grapes, watermelon whose seeds came from Venezuela, guava, cherries, guanabana and mangos. M added that they also hunted small animals like rabbit and iguana with spears.

G, H, I, J, M and N all said that the Indians grew corn. It seemed very that H, J, M and N at the beginning of the interview all felt strongly that the Indians had no agriculture but upon further questioning realized from their own answer that the Indians must have grown maize. H and M remembered Pompati, a corn bread ground on two stones and baked on a casuela. N, in discussing pottery, said corn was stored and realized it had to be grown first. I said they grew corn from seeds and with tools from Venezuela. They started planting in Savaneta and moved to Santa Cruz. There were two types of corn, the big kind and the little called rabo. G felt they made a liquid food of corn, because shell spoons were found in urns.

Water

The source of fresh water was wells to the thinking of M and N. M also spoke of canals dug for the transportation and storage of water. J said the Indians made dams to stop and keep water for irrigation. G. described the roois that would fill up every rainy season and kept the water all year. They were surrounded by sand that was high and kept the water in. "I" talked about the tinashi, a large barrel about 4 feet high, which collected rain water.

Pottery

Pottery was used for burial (M, N, J, I, L). A more detailed description includes big and small sized urns with one person each and small hole in the bottom to let out moisture (M), a large urn holding several bodies which were cracked to fit in (N). A 4' high urn called Bubali in which the bodies are flexed but not broken (J), and again, the one person burial urn (I).

Urn were also used to hold fresh water, well-water, corn (N and I) and to eat from (L).

The urns were made of manteca-clay, water, and grass which was then fired. They were shaped by hand in a process called fatsuná (J) and were painted and unpainted (G).

Informant M illuminated me on the subject of lanterns. She said the soldier-crab (soldachi) was taken from the shell and stuffed into an empty conch. A cotton string served as a wick and two pieces of flint were used to ignite the string. Soldier crabs, she said, burn like kerosine and the Indians, in this way, had light.

It seemed to me that though the informants had conflicting opinions on such things as the name of the Indian group living here, urn-burials, whether or not they were used and their different types, living quarters, structure of houses or preference for caves, and the food the Indians ate, some informants mentioned fruit or no fruit, hunting or no hunting, all informants thought of the Indians on about the same cultural level.

The conflicting data was in a similar range. Whether the Indians used urn burials or not, they did burn their dead and they did n't use coffins or elaborate tombs. Some people thought the Aruban and Venezuelan Indian kept up very close, busy trade relation. Some didn't. But the informants who said they did, described the means and extent of trade as being very similar to the original migration (using the same type of boats, bringing the same basic items) brought the first time. These examples suggest that the conception of the Aruban people as a whole remained on a particular cultural plane within the dissimilarities in the details of certain aspects of Indian life in Aruba.

I collected specific information about the Tanki Flip area because I was most familiar with it since I had helped in its excavation. I wanted to get opinions on the probability of its being an Indian habitation site. What follows are the responses of 3 gentlemen. Though their answers slightly differ, their ideas on the structure of Indian life in a particular are strikingly similar. Informant I said that Tanki Flip was used by the Indians from 4 to 5 years.

One group would stay a year or two and then move on. Two to three groups utilized the area. There were 50 to 60 people in a group. They moved when the soil became sterile and a few years later the next group settled there. They built huts already described above. The men fished and the women worked on the fields and made pottery. Men sometimes worked on the fields also. They used the slash and burn technique. They also divided up the field into one portion, for planting and one portion for breaking conch. There was a footpath from Tanki Flip to Palm Beach where the men did fishing and shellfish collecting.

The small polished shell button like objects found in Tanki Flip, were used as buttons on clothing with a piece of straw for thread after European contact. Before European contact the Indians were naked.

Informant G had this to say: The Indians lived at Tanki Flip for an indefinite period of time, since the soil remained usable when turned over with a stick. About 150 people lived in this area which is considerably large than Henriquez field in Tanki Flip where I excavated. The men fished and the women worked in the field and made pottery. It was a favorable area because it was covered with trees and cactus which made it good hiding protection from the European. They got fresh water from the Tanki. They had cooking pots, canoes, arrows, spears and buttons and marbles used as money. They lived in mud shacks and made liquid food from maize.

When I asked Informant C to just talk about Tanki Flip he came up with a great deal of information. He seemed

to know the area very well.

Tanki Flip might have been a good place to live. It's not too rocky and has good soil for planting. But most probably the Indians lived North about 3 kilometers near where a church now stands. There are caves there. They might just have come to Tanki Flip to plant maize. There was cactus all over. They burned the cactus and planted in one spot till the soil was sterile, then moved on. The soil was good for 3 to 4 years and one group of 40 people stayed the whole time. They planted when it rained. The women took care of the fields and cooked. The men fished. The Indians were not in Tanki Flip too often. The women came to plant and occasionally returned to see the progress of the corn. Both men and women worked there to harvest the maize and this is when they also cooked and ate at Tanki Flip.

They ate fish, stew, corn, cakes, iguana, birds and salted meats from other islands. They had spears for hunting, fishing, self-defense in case of quarrels. They also had tools to dig holes made of sharpened bone and stone.

There is the same amount of water now as then and the soil is of the same quality. There is probably more water to the North West nearer the sea.

Brackish water is also available in this area. The people might get a little sick but they could live on it.

But it is still satisfactory for agriculture.

Appendix

Blacks

- A. Thomas
- B. Alvin Howell
- C. E. Bennett
- D. BerrylDonald E.
- E. Linda

Foreign

- F. Ernie Rodriguez

Arubans

- G. Seferiano Luidens
- H. Mr. Rosenstand
- I. Remigio Frank
- J. Maximiliano Tromp
- K. Ito Tromp
- L. Henrietta Boekhoudt
- M. Carolina Everon
- N. Polita Kelly

A. Thomas

Born in Aruba, about 23 years old, raised in Aruba and was a theology student. Works at Lago, was a scout-master for a while and now teacher fencing and roller skating at the YMCA in San Nicolas.

I met Thomas the second day I was in Aruba. I and three other girls were riding from Oranjestad to Lago and he rode in the same autobus. Since I had not even started my studies at that time I had no idea what my project would be. My questions were indirected and cursory. Upon our second meeting, I had a much clearer idea of how I would go about doing my project. B. and G. and I went to the YMCA where he worked and waited till he finished his instructions. We then went into an empty room where he proceeded to take out an Esso Map and show us archeological sites. I believe that what meager information he gave me was all he had, and no set of circumstances could have made the interview more fruitful.

B. Alvin Howell

He is a young Aruban man in his early twenties. He works at the YMCA at San Nicolas in distributing roller skates. The circumstances of this interview were very poor. Alvin was playing chinese checkers with another boy while he was giving out roller skates. His attention was already twice diverted which led to confusion in his answer. It is essential that interviews take place in quiet, undiverting situations.

C. Mr. E. Bennett

He is a black man of about 45 years. He is crippled in his right leg. Born in Aruba, he now teaches in the public school after four years training in Holland. I was excavating a pit at Tanki Flip when I noticed Mr. Bennett walking through the site, asking questions of everyone working there. I asked him if he would talk to me about the Tanki Flip area and we both sat under the Dividivi tree and talked about a half hour. He was able to speak while visualizing the subject. It was ideal. (He is a musician).

D. - E. Berryl and Linda

They are sisters, both Aruban born and raised. They are in their late teens. Berryl a couple of years older. They have been going to school here and I don't know to what point they have reached in their studies. I met them at the YMCA at San Nicolas. It was noisy and crowded. They were speaking to other people while I was interviewing them. They answered all my questions with "we really don't know anything about that". Finding the situation impossible, I did not try to pursue further.

F. Ernie Rodriguez

He was born in Panama and did a lot of travelling through Mexico, Central and South America. He has been living in Aruba for about 10 years. I don't know what he does for a living but he fishes at B.A. Beach every Sunday afternoon.

He's married and in his early 50's. I went to visit Ernie with 3 other students one afternoon when he was fishing. We all sat on the sand together talking. Though it was a very comfortable chat he was rather eager to get back to his fishing line. Also, Ernie's bulk of information was on folk medicine. He didn't like to go visiting much or to be with people too often. He had been socializing two or three times since he has been in Aruba. A foreigner who has not bothered to meet Arubans would not and as Ernie proved, does not know much about Aruban pre-history.

G. Sef Luidens

Mr. Luidens comes from a long established Dutch background but he considers himself an Aruban. I find him much more Indian than Dutch looking in features and coloring. He has a good job at Lago, is married and has children. When interviewed in he was recuperating from a hip and leg injury. He was very happy to receive visitors and only too eager to help the Aruba Research Center with as much information as he could possibly give. The hospital room afforded privacy and quiet. It was a productive interview.

H. Mr. Rosenstand

About 40 years old, educated in Holland, Aruba born, he is the author of a book on Aruban folktales (foreign introduced). He lives in a lovely home in a suburb of Oranjestad. He is married and has children. I interviewed him on the patio of his home. I was

disappointed to find that he looked up almost the answers to my questions in Hartog's Aruba, an other small pamphlets he had brought out to assist him. I explained that I was interested in what he thought and not what the books said but he persisted.

I. Remigio Frank

Mr. Frank, about 50 years old, was born and raised in Aruba. He spent 12 years in school in Aruba and 4 years in Holland. He now teaches in public school in Aruba. He is married and has children. I interviewed him in the home of Miss Florencia Fingal, another teacher, while a student was speaking to her, with the use of an interpreter. Mr. Frank spoke English. I found asking initial questions and getting responses easy enough, but I became very distracted by the other interview when I tried to go back over my interview and question Mr. Frank a second time on the basis of his first answer. Again, an undisturbing setting is essential.

J. Maximiliano Tromp

Born in 1893 on April 3, married 54 years. Mr. Tromp is a descendent of Andres Tromp, the first commander of Aruba. He went to the school of Nort from the ages of 7 to 16. Upon finishing school he went to work in the gold mine. In 1928 he started working at Lago until he was 60. He then started working at the Caribbean Hotel as a janitor until he was forced to

retire 2 years ago. He owns a very large tract of land and works a smool portion of it. I went with Ito Tromp, who is an ethnographer, and another student to visit older people living in the cunucu.

Ito would bring his tape recorder and tape the whole interview. His relaxed manner and ability to joke with the people make the interviews much more pleasant and productive. Most important, he spoke their language Papiamento. Not only the cultural but the language barrier was broken by interviewing with him. The one charming but rather inconvenient factor of my interview with Max was his uninterruptable talking. Ito did not get a chance to stop him and translate, therefore, I could not ask specific questions. Mr. Tromp rambled on for a few hours and the tape had to be translated later.

K. Ito Tromp.

His family has been long established in Aruba. He is 29 and married without children. He said he hasn't got the time to have children, which seems so from the myraid of jobs he works at. He is the acting head of the Department of Culture and education, Ethnographer, translator and reporter of the world news twice a day on the radio, does radio-commercials, is the Master of Ceremonies at almost all social functions in Aruba. He is about one year away from having a Masters Degree in public administration. I met him briefly at the Aruba Caribbean Hotel one afternoon and again at one of Dr. Bendix's lecture on Papiamento.

But the most information I received from him was while riding around the cunucu, between interviews with other people. I find he was more relaxed talking on a friendly basis as we were driving around doing the same work, than when I spoke to him alone in an interviewer-informant relationship.

L. Henrietta Boekhoudt

Native Aruban, living in the cunucu. She is 71 years old and lives with her 71 year old husband. Many assorted relatives live in the same house with them. I interviewed Mrs. Boekhoudt with the help of Ito Tromp. The circumstances were good but she just didn't want to answer my questions. She was afraid of a superstition involving Indian story telling.

M. Carolina Everon

She is a born Aruban, who speaks Papiamento only, 82 years old and had 7 children, one of which died. Miss Everon never married because the man she loved and had children by was already married. I interviewed her with the assistance of her grandson as an interpreter. I found difficulties using him as interpreter because he felt my questions were too obvious and often answered them himself without asking her. I don't believe he translated her answer completely, because he took it for granted I knew the answer.

N. Polita Kelly

She is an 81 year old born Aruban, whose great grandmother came over from Holland. She lives alone in a very neat 62 year old house in the cunucu, but sleeps at one of her son's homes nearby. She is mother of 9, grandmother of 57 and greatgrandmother of 60 children. She spoke only Papiamentu and I interviewed her with the help of Ito Tromp in the same manner as the Max Tromp's interview described above. He would ask a question in Papiamentu, get a reply and translate the answer for me so I could ask the next question. I can think of no way of improving the situation, except my knowing Papiamentu would have been an asset.